

Learning from lovers

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We learn only from those we love.

Goethe

I'll be your mirror, reflect what you are...

The Velvet Underground

Many readers of Greek tragedy get the impression that the ancients had a pretty negative view of love. *Eros* (the Greek word for 'love', or 'lust') is, for the tragedians, a 'tyrant among men', robbing us of our reason and leaving a trail of disasters in its wake. But love was also seen by Greeks as a positive force in public life. At its very best, love was a bond between citizens in the body politic or between soldiers in an invincible 'army of lovers', or between teachers and students. When we reflect on the positive potential of love there is no better guide than Plato. He wrote extensively on various forms of love; in many dialogues, love is placed at the heart of his proposed reforms for public life. In this article, I want to show how Plato thought love can help us become better people.

The ancients distinguished different forms of love. *Eros* indicated an intense sexual attachment. It is this erotic love, in particular, that Plato is interested in when outlining his educational reforms. In two dialogues, the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*, Plato shows how the right sort of love relationship will educate us in the sort of knowledge we need to be happy. This theme is also explored in detail in the *Symposium*, Plato's dialogue set during a famous party held at the house of Agathon, where Socrates is depicted as both the ideal philosopher and a master of erotic love. The two are, it turns out, closely related: knowing how to love correctly is knowing how to practise philosophy.

The final speech in the *Symposium* explores this theme from a rather personal angle. It is given by one of Socrates' most intimate lovers, the famous Athenian general Alcibiades, who describes his involvement with Socrates. Alcibiades' presence in a dialogue which discusses the benefits of love is highly significant, since Alcibiades was notorious for his errant love. Plutarch reports how he carried a thunder-bearing *Eros* on his shield in place of the usual ancestral emblem, while Thucydides comments on his 'lawless' and 'hubristic' eros. Alcibiades was prime example of someone whose love needed correction. So Socrates, one should have thought, was just the partner he needed. In fact, what happened historically was that Alcibiades became no better: his life ended in disgrace and exile. As for Socrates, the association with Alcibiades was partially responsible for the charge of 'corrupting the young' and subsequently for his trial and death by hemlock. So, hardly a happy ending to the romance. Many Socratic writers, including Plato, picked up the challenge to defend Socrates from the charge of corrupting youths such as Alcibiades. In so doing they explain, and defend, the benefits of philosophical love.

Life and soul of the party

Here is what happens in the *Symposium*. After all the other guests at the drinking party have given their speeches in praise of love, Alcibiades bursts into the room drunk. In confessional mode, he recounts the details of his relationship with Socrates. He says that since Socrates is always hanging around beautiful young men (including Alcibiades himself) and enchanting them with his conversation, he appears to be a suitable lover. Alcibiades, who is proud of his own physical beauty, thought that he should

enter into a 'pederastic' (or 'boy-loving') relationship with Socrates, of the sort that was relatively common in aristocratic circles of the day, whereby an older man (the 'lover') pursued a younger boy (the 'beloved').

Socrates, however, proves to be a difficult lover. He is unmoved by the advances of the supposedly irresistible Alcibiades. The rejection leads to a role reversal, whereby Alcibiades adopts the role of an over-zealous lover pursuing (paradoxically) the older and uglier Socrates: as if, Plato writes, he 'were a lover pursuing a beloved'. He tries 'a direct assault' on Socrates and invites him to the wrestling school, where he (Alcibiades) will be seen at his semi-clad and well-oiled best. He invites Socrates to dinner and lies down beside him, alone, at night. No luck. All Socrates wants to do, according to Alcibiades, is to engage in his usual conversation about virtue and such things. Socrates shows himself to be a temperate and chaste lover. Alcibiades is confused and humiliated. Socrates, Alcibiades concludes, is a deceptive seducer of the young: he appears to be a lover, but then disappears from this role, leaving unsatisfied youths in his wake.

Socrates' rejection of physical charms in favour of conversation shows that it is the charms of the soul that form the focus of his love. In another dialogue (written by Plato or an imitator), *Alcibiades I*, which also concerns the relationship between the two men, the love of the soul is shown to be an important first step on a philosophical path. Since, as Socrates argues, the soul is the true self,

Someone who loved you should love your soul.

Alcibiades agrees.

Wouldn't someone who loves your body go off and leave you when your beauty is no longer in full bloom? ... But someone who loves your soul will not leave you as long as you're still making progress?

Alcibiades agrees.

So you must try to make yourself as attractive as possible.

The discussion as a whole is designed to turn Alcibiades away from his indulgent lifestyle, towards philosophy. Socrates' point here is that it is only if you have a lover who is attracted to your soul that you will be concerned to cultivate your soul and make it 'as attractive as possible'. This is not a bad argument. If you are aware that your friends or lovers find you attractive because of some physical charm, then you are inspired in their presence to highlight the very charm that is the basis of securing their continued attraction. If, on the other hand, someone loves you for your wit or intellect, then it is in those departments that you will try to shine. By loving Alcibiades' soul, Socrates is attempting to encourage Alcibiades to make his soul as attractive as possible, to make progress. In other words, to practise philosophy.

Mirror, mirror...

Elsewhere in the *Alcibiades I*, the lover and the beloved are described as 'mirrors' for one another, in which each can see his own virtues and faults reflected. This 'mirroring' role (also alluded to in Plato's *Phaedrus*) is exactly the role that, back in the *Symposium*, Socrates adopts towards Alcibiades. Socrates'

love forces Alcibiades to come face-to-face with his own virtues and vices. That is perhaps why Alcibiades finds Socrates such an unbearable lover. He explains that:

Socrates is the only person in the world towards whom I have experienced what one wouldn't suppose I had in me: feeling ashamed towards someone, no matter who. It's only towards him that I feel it. For I'm conscious that I am not capable of arguing against doing what he tells me to do, and that whenever I leave him, I'm giving in to my desire for the honour that comes from ordinary people. In any case I'm off and away from him like a runaway slave, and when I see him I'm ashamed because of what's been agreed between us.

Alcibiades feels shame in the presence of Socrates because he is aware of how far he falls short of the beauty that inspires Socrates' love and which he, in his turn, loves in Socrates. When he is with Socrates he desires to be worthy of that love, to be, in short, a better man. This is surely why a love relationship can have the positive potential that Plato harnesses for philosophy. For a good lover wants to encourage the development of those beneficial qualities that attracted him in the first place, and a good beloved wants to be worthy of the love and beauty that attracts the lover and, consequently to make 'himself' – that is, his soul, the 'philosophical' part of him – 'as attractive as possible'. A good relationship is often one in which your partner sees the best in you and in so doing inspires you to develop that character trait. This is why lovers can be such powerful forces for self-improvement. It is also why we can learn so much from lovers.

Why Alcibiades failed to become a better man is not, at least according to this story, through any fault of Socrates, but because Alcibiades had a competing passion, his desire for the regard of the Athenian populace, which eventually led to his ruin. Their love, Plato suggests, elicited only the worst from Alcibiades. Good, Socratic, love might have saved him.

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